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Lebanon/IS: Soldier Beheading a War Crime if Confirmed

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The alleged beheading of Lebanese army sergeant Ali al-Sayed detained by the Islamic State is a war crime if confirmed, Human Rights Watch said today. Photos and a video were posted online on August 28 purportedly showing an Islamic State militant beheading a blindfolded man who is identified as Sergeant al-Sayed. Lebanese authorities have not yet officially confirmed the beheading.

According to media reports, the extremist groups the Islamic State, formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), and Jabhat al-Nusra seized at least 35 Lebanese soldiers and security personnel, including Sergeant al-Sayed, during clashes which began on August 2 in Aarsal, Lebanon. So far, thirteen soldiers and security personnel have been released. The extremist groups have requested the release of Islamist detainees in Roumieh as a condition to release the remaining hostages. The Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra should free all hostages immediately and ensure that all captured soldiers and security personnel are treated in accordance with the laws of war, Human Rights Watch said.

"The alleged beheading of Sergeant Ali al-Sayed is a horrific act and if true, would amount to a war crime," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "We remain concerned about the fate of the remaining captives."

Abu Musaab Hafid al-Baghdadi, who identifies himself as a member of the Islamic State, posted photos on his Twitter account on August 28 purportedly showing an Islamic State militant beheading a blindfolded man who is identified as Ali al-Sayed.

The Committee of Muslim Scholars, an association of Sunni religious scholars based in Lebanon, which had been involved in the negotiations with the Islamic State over the detained soldiers, said in a statement on August 29 that they can neither confirm nor deny that the soldier was killed. Interior Minister Nouhad al-Mashnouq told Lebanese news outlets on August 29 that the Lebanese army had formed a committee of experts to investigate the alleged beheading. However, Lebanese security officials and Islamic State members reportedly confirmed the beheading to media outlets and an audio recording was published on August 28 purportedly of a phone conversation during which a representative of the Committee of Muslim Scholars confirms that the beheading took place. On September 1, the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation reported that al-Sayed's body was being transported to a military hospital, although they did not cite the source of their information.

The summary execution of anyone detained, including hostages such as al-Sayed, is a war crime, Human

Rights Watch said.

A representative from the ISF confirmed to Human Rights Watch that to date, 14 policemen are still being held captive. The army has not issued a list of abducted soldiers. According to media outlets, 12 soldiers remain in custody of the armed groups. In total, 13 soldiers and security personnel have been released.

On August 29 a video was released on youtube in which nine Lebanese soldiers held captive by the Islamic State declared that they will all be executed unless the government releases Islamist detainees from Roumieh prison within the next three days. On August 31, Jabhat al-Nusra threatened to execute Lebanese Shia security forces members if Hezbollah continues its military campaign in the Syrian region of Qalamoun which borders Aarsal, local media reported. Hezbollah fighters and Syrian government forces have been battling armed groups in Qalamoun intermittently.

On August 19, Lebanese government officials received a list of demands from the groups in exchange for the release of the hostages. While the list has not been made public, media reports indicate that it includes the release of some Islamist detainees from Roumieh prison in Lebanon.

Taking hostages is a war crime.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has defined hostage taking as the seizure or detention of a combatant or civilian, combined with threatening to kill, injure, or continue to detain the person, with the intention to compel a government, international organization, or group to act or to refrain from acting as a condition for the person's safety or release.

International humanitarian workers operating in Lebanon told Human Rights Watch that they have observed an uptick in attacks against Syrian refugees by some Lebanese civilians since the clashes erupted in Aarsal. Residents in the northern Lebanese town of Rahbe told Human Rights Watch that several Syrian refugees were physically attacked in the streets by Lebanese civilians following the outbreak of violence in Aarsal. Lebanese security forces should remain vigilant against any abuse of Syrian refugees and ensure that anyone responsible for violations is held to account.

"Syrian refugees should not be scapegoated for criminal acts committed by extremist groups such as the Islamic State," Whitson said.

Background:

On August 2, Lebanese Armed Forces detained Imad Ahmed Jumaa at a checkpoint in the Aarsal outskirts. While the Lebanese National News Agency identified Jumaa as a member of the extremist Islamist group Jabhat al-Nusra, Jabhat al-Nusra reportedly denied his membership in the group and other media outlets have identified him as the leader of the Fajr al-Islam Brigade, a group which pledged allegiance in July 2014 to the Islamic State. Following Jumaa's arrest, unidentified militants, some of whom reportedly belong to Fajr al-Islam, began surrounding Lebanese army checkpoints in and around Aarsal and demanding his release. Some of the militants also broke into the Internal Security Forces (ISF) station in Aarsal, seized several ISF members there, released several Syrian detainees, and reportedly killed two civilians who tried to stop them.

Clashes between the militants and the Lebanese army continued from August 2 through August 5 when the Lebanese army announced that it had pushed the militants to Aarsal's outskirts in Wadi Hamayyed, close to the Syrian border. On August 6, a cease-fire, mediated by the Committee of Muslim Scholars was implemented and on August 9 the Lebanese army entered Aarsal, taking control of the city. However, militants clashed with the Lebanese army on the outskirts of Aarsal again on August 28, indicating that the security situation in the city remains precarious.

In addition to the hostages, according to the Lebanese army 19 Lebanese soldiers were killed in the fighting and 86 were wounded, 67 militants were also reportedly killed. In addition a field hospital in Aarsal has reported that 489 people were wounded and at least 59 civilians - 44 Syrians and 15 Aarsal natives -

were reportedly killed in the fighting.

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